

African mothers experiences of the “New Beginnings” mother-infant group psychotherapy programme: reflecting on mothering while living in a shelter.

Hasmita Hardudh-Dass

564428

Dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters in Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychology,
University of the Witwatersrand

DECEMBER 2011

Supervisor: Dr Katherine Bain

DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any Degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to and quotation in this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

ABSTRACT

Infant mental health in South Africa has been receiving more attention in recent years. Mothers appear to be the main caregivers of infants but they face many psychosocial, economic and cultural challenges. There exists very little evidence suggesting that mothers living in shelters or institutions have access to the necessary support and education to help them to understand their circumstances and how this may impact on the attachment with their infant. The New Beginnings Programme, as an early intervention model, is aimed at improving attachment between mother and infant so as to reduce the potential risk of mental health problems later in life for the infants, the mothers and future generations. This evidence based intervention focuses on the mother and her capacity for mentalisation, which refers to the mother's capacity to hold her infant in mind and recognise and respond to the inner states of the infant. The pilot study of the New Beginnings Programme within a South African context took place in two shelters in the Greater Johannesburg area. This particular study formed part of this bigger research effort. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of the mothers who attended the New Beginnings programme. A secondary aim was to explore these mothers' experiences of the programme within the context of living in a shelter. The adaptation of this programme to a South African context could contribute significantly to bridging the gap in mother-infant attachment which could influence the future mental health of the infant and their ability to foster ongoing healthy attachments later in life. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews and a narrative analysis from the theoretical perspective of psychoanalytic attachment theory. Thirteen mothers from two shelters participated in this research study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following people for having contributed in different, yet important ways to this research report:

My supervisor Katherine Bain who was patient and offered me invaluable guidance. Your support and encouragement has been so meaningful to me. I will always value your contribution to my academic and psychological growth.

The mothers who allowed me into their minds and lives. Your narratives have humbled me. You and your infants have found a warm place in my mind.

My family and friends for always keeping me in mind and allowing me to be consumed by my work. My heartfelt appreciation for your unwavering support.

Nielan, Tejal and Nirvana, you are my secure base. I am eternally grateful for your love and support without which I would not have had the courage to attempt such an undertaking. I love you.

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|---------------|
| DECLARATION..... | ii |
| ABSTRACT..... | iii |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... | iv |
| CONTENTS..... | v |
| CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| 1.1. Introduction and rationale..... | 1 |
| 1.2. Aims..... | 4 |
| 1.3. Methodology..... | 5 |
| 1.4. Theoretical framework..... | 6 |
| CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK..... | 8 |
| 2.1 Introduction..... | 8 |
| 2.1.1 Attachment in shelters..... | 8 |
| 2.1.2 Intergenerational transmission of attachment..... | 11 |
| 2.1.3 Mentalising and development of the self..... | 13 |
| CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 19 |
| 3.1 Introduction..... | 19 |
| 3.1.1 General parenting experiences in deprived and shelter settings... | 19 |
| 3.1.2 Parent-infant work and group therapy in South Africa..... | 21 |
| 3.1.3 Mother-infant psychotherapy with a focus on groupwork..... | 23 |
| 3.1.4 The ‘New Beginnings’ programme..... | 26 |
| 3.1.5 Conclusion..... | 29 |
| CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY..... | 30 |
| 4.1 Methodology..... | 30 |
| 4.2 Participants..... | 31 |
| 4.3 Data collection..... | 32 |
| 4.4 Data analysis..... | 34 |

| | | |
|---|---|-----------|
| 4.5 | Interviewer countertransference/observations..... | 38 |
| 4.6 | Ethical considerations..... | 40 |
| CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH RESULTS..... | | 42 |
| 5.1 | Introduction..... | 42 |
| 5.2 | Experience of the group..... | 42 |
| 5.2.1 | Defensiveness/reluctance to engage..... | 42 |
| 5.2.2 | Safety/structure..... | 49 |
| 5.2.3 | Therapists' emotional availability..... | 53 |
| 5.2.4 | Deprivation (wanting more) and abandonment..... | 57 |
| 5.3 | Experience of the programme..... | 61 |
| 5.3.1 | The past..... | 61 |
| 5.3.2 | Achievement/empowerment/behaviour change..... | 67 |
| 5.3.3 | Development of reflective functioning..... | 71 |
| 5.4 | Mothering in a shelter..... | 78 |
| 5.5 | Conclusion..... | 80 |
| CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION..... | | 82 |
| 6.1 | Introduction..... | 82 |
| 6.2 | The mothers experiences of the efficacy of the group..... | 82 |
| 6.3 | The mothers experiences of the content of the programme and of the therapists of the group psychotherapy..... | 91 |
| 6.4 | The context of living in a shelter and its influence on the mothers' experiences of mothering..... | 98 |
| 6.5 | The context of living in a shelter and its influence on the mothers experiences of being in a psychotherapy group, aimed at the relationship between the mother and her infant..... | 102 |
| 6.6 | Conclusion..... | |

| | |
|---|------------|
| CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION..... | 106 |
| 7.1 Findings of the research..... | 106 |
| 7.2 Clinical implications/suggestions for the New Beginnings programme..... | 111 |
| 7.3 Limitations of the current research..... | 113 |
| 7.4 Recommendations for future research..... | 114 |
| REFERENCES..... | 115 |
| APPENDIX 1: New Beginnings Programme Interview Schedule..... | 120 |
| APPENDIX 2: Letter to shelter Director..... | 122 |
| APPENDIX 3: Participant Information Sheet..... | 123 |
| APPENDIX 4: Consent Form(Interview, assessment and group participation)..... | 125 |
| APPENDIX 5: Consent Form (Audio and Video Recording)..... | 126 |
| APPENDIX 6: Translator/Research assistant/Video Editor Confidentiality Contract..... | 127 |